

House OKs \$200M budget that includes teacher raises

Posted on March 5, 2014
Yakima Herald

Rachel La Corte
The Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — The House approved a supplemental budget Tuesday that would restore cost-of-living increases for teachers and put additional money into the state's public education system.

The budget, estimated at more than \$200 million, passed on a mostly party-line 53-44 vote, and now leaders in that chamber and the Senate, which passed its budget last week, will start negotiating a final budget plan. Democratic Rep. Larry Seaquist, of Gig Harbor, voted with Republicans in opposing the budget measure.

The measure makes adjustments to the \$33.6 billion, two-year state operating budget approved by the Legislature last year.

Rep. Ross Hunter, a Democrat from Medina who is the House's key budget writer, said the plan "makes an investment toward meeting our obligation to fund public education."

The focus on education spending continues as part of the state's ongoing response to a 2012 ruling by the state Supreme Court, which found that the state is not meeting its constitutional obligation concerning education funding. That ruling was the result of a lawsuit brought by a coalition of school districts, parents and education groups, known as the McCleary case for the family named in the suit. The court has required yearly progress reports from the Legislature on its efforts. Those reports are then critiqued by the group that brought the lawsuit and by the Supreme Court.

The latest communication from the high court earlier this year told lawmakers to submit a complete plan by the end of April detailing how the state will fully pay for basic education.

The chamber debated more than two dozen amendments and passed several, including one to spend nearly \$56 million to restore the voter-approved cost-of-living raises for teachers, which have been suspended for the last few budget cycles. Another amendment approved by the chamber spends an additional \$13.5 million on early learning programs.

When announcing their budget proposal last week, House Democrats announced that they would be looking to close four tax exemptions to pay for the education spending, including a sales tax break for some out-of-state shoppers and a sales-tax exemption for bottled water. The tax exemption bills will be voted on separately, but Republicans opposed to the budget said that those bills amount to tax increase.

“This is a tax and spend budget,” said Rep. Charles Ross, R-Naches. “It increases taxes and increases spending at a time when the citizens of Washington have told us repeatedly, repeatedly they’ve told us, no new taxes.”

Also Tuesday, the House passed a bipartisan construction budget and a measure that would sell \$700 million in bonds backed by lottery money for grants dedicated to building classrooms for all-day kindergarten and for reduction of class sizes for kindergarten through third grade.

- The budget is Senate Bill 6002.